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Envoys assist citizens of U.S.

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PHUKET, Thailand — For some American diplomats, a planned day at the beach has turned into a grim and grueling ordeal.

Richard Hanrahan, vice consul at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, was on a Christmas vacation with his family on this southern Thai resort island when the Dec. 26 tsunami scored a direct hit on the beach hotel where he was staying.

The diplomat and his family were unharmed, but Mr. Hanrahan has stayed on in Phuket, dealing with hundreds of Americans who lost loved ones, material possessions and passports in the killer wave.

"So many of the stories we heard were truly heartbreaking," said Mr. Hanrahan, who helped brief a delegation led by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Florida Gov. Jeb Bush yesterday.

Instead of wrapping up their vacations, Mr. Hanrahan and his colleagues have been visiting hospitals, dealing with a blitz of inquiries from worried

U.S. relatives, and helping stranded Americans with travel documents and other aid for the flight home.

Eight of the 16 confirmed American deaths from the disaster were in Thailand, and U.S. officials still list another 400 U.S. citizens as "unaccounted for." There is no U.S. consular office in Phuket, and the first diplomatic efforts here were staffed by Mr. Hanrahan and other U.S. diplomats who happened to be on the island.

It is still far from clear how many of the missing Americans have died, and consular officers did not even want to guess. Consular officer Katherine Hennessey said that, unlike the more numerous European travelers here, U.S. visitors did not travel in organized tour groups and, thus, were harder to track.

"The Americans who get to Phuket tend to be a hardy, independent bunch," she said, and that has made the consular officers' work that much more difficult.

U.S. diplomats already have issued an estimated 115 emergency passports to U.S. travelers who lost their posses-

sions in the Dec. 26 tragedy. About 100 Americans were hospitalized, although virtually all have been treated and released.

"Some of the people we dealt with were left with nothing but the swimsuit they were wearing," said Miss Hennessey.

The makeshift consular office in Phuket shares quarters with representatives from some two dozen foreign embassies in the provincial administrative building. Phuket was a popular resort with European, South African and Australian vacationers, and Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai said yesterday that 2,463 of the known 5,187 fatalities in Thailand were foreign nationals.

Michael Chadwick, a U.S. consular officer based in Singapore, also was spending the holidays in Phuket when the tsunami hit. He recalled a particularly difficult case involving an American tourist whose East European girlfriend was killed by the wave.

He said he had spent considerable time working on replacement travel documents and clearing hurdles with the East European government.

